

ENCOURAGEMENT TO BE SALT AND LIGHT

October 5, 2014

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

17th Sunday of Pentecost

World Communion Sunday

Peacemaking Offering Sunday

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Psalms 19

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-56

3rd IN SERIES

Encouragement to be Salt and Light

Acts 11:19-30

Matthew 5:13-16



There are all kinds of theories about how to motivate people. We can do it through guilt, through fear, through shame. But these were not Jesus' methods. Jesus motivated through positive messages of hope and encouragement.

Consider our 1st reading this morning. Jesus says to his followers, "You are the salt of the earth," and "You are the light of the world. . . ." Can you imagine that? Here was a motley crew of farmers and fishermen and tax collectors and housewives in a tiny and remote village in an obscure part of the world and Jesus was saying to them, "You are the light of the world." Talk about a statement of faith! Talk about a crazy idea! Light of the world? That bunch? It must have sounded absurd at the time even to them.

Only Jesus could have seen that through this gaggle of folks that God would indeed change the world. At the time, however, it probably sounded like so much idle chatter. "You are the light of the world," he said and so they were. Now if you want to consider

something even more absurd and silly. So are we.

In February of this year, we gave some attention to the nature of salt and Jesus saying, "You are the salt of the earth." We considered how salt makes things taste better, buoys up that which is heavy, is valuable as a commodity, and helps to heal and disinfect. We looked at those principles considering that Jesus was actually not being critical, but paying the disciples a compliment. Today, I'd like to suggest, that he not only pays a compliment, but sets the direction for purposeful living and mission.

Once there lived a man who wanted to determine which of his two children was more worthy of inheriting his property. And so he gave each a coin. "Buy something with this coin that will fill the house."

The first tried to think of something he could buy with that coin that could fulfill his father's wishes. He decided on a load of straw. But when he returned home, he didn't even have enough straw to cover the floor.

The 2nd child chose a wiser course. He spent his coin on candles. As he lighted each candle, their light filled the house.

To the second he said, "To you I give my business. You have shown wisdom."

"There is not enough darkness in the entire world," writes Robert Alden, "to put out the light of even one small candle." And that is true. No wonder the imagery of light is so important to our faith.

Jesus says to us this morning that WE are the light of the world. Sink your teeth into that and savor it a bit. You and I are the light of the world. What could that mean? Well, let me suggest some possibilities.

IT MEANS, FIRST OF ALL, THAT WE HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE WORLD. That makes sense, doesn't it? We are the light of the world. Light does not exist for its own glory but to brighten up that which is around it.

I was read recently about one of the most remarkable young men who has ever lived. He was a young man who had been left blind in both eyes by a childhood accident. In nineteenth-century France, when this young man lived, blind children had little help and few hopes. But then a kind priest, Father Jacques Palluy, took an interest in the boy. He was amazed at the boy's intelligence and eagerness to learn. With his parents' permission, Father Palluy enrolled the boy in the Royal Institute of Blind Youth in Paris.

Thrust into a new and frightening environment, this boy was lonely and depressed. In time, he found friendship and encouragement. Unfortunately he was frustrated by the institute's lack of books in

raised print. He also found the symbols in raised print confusing. So he set out, at twelve years of age, to invent his own system. After three years he perfected the method, but he encountered indifference and hostility when he tried to convince the world that his system was better. Even with the support of the institute's director, he was told again and again that he was too young to have created a workable alphabet for the blind. Years passed. This young man grew older, was made a teacher at the institute, and became a fine organist, always hoping that his method would find acceptance. But his health was frail. It was not until he lay in bed, dying of tuberculosis, that he heard that the first steps were being taken to popularize his system. He did not live to witness it, but Louis Braille's alphabet became the universal method of reading for the blind. His courage and hunger for knowledge enabled him to triumph over disability and disease and open new worlds to future generations.¹

Louis Braille became light for those whose physical eyes had failed them. How wonderful it is when a young person sets out to make the world a better place.

Some of you can remember when the pulpits of this nation sounded with the call for young men and women to go out as missionaries to be light to a world of darkness. We don't sound that trumpet like we once did. We don't call people to sacrifice what they have and all they are for the good of humanity" and it is sad. We are the light of the world. We have a responsibility for the world.

¹ Margaret Davidson, *Louis Braille: The Boy Who Invented Books for the Blind*, Scholastic, 1971. Cited in BTBC, pp. 250-251.

WE ALSO HAVE SOMETHING THAT THE WORLD DESPERATELY NEEDS. Jesus was saying this when he said that we are the light of the world. We have something the world cannot find anywhere else.

Mother Teresa was speaking to persons who had come to meet her from all over the world. Among the groups to which she spoke was one of religious sisters from many North American orders. After her talk she asked if there were any questions. "Yes, I have one," a woman sitting near the front said. "As you know, most of the orders represented here have been losing members. It seems that more and more women are leaving all the time. And yet your order is attracting thousands upon thousands. What do you do?"

Without hesitating Mother Teresa answered, "I give them Jesus."

"Yes I know," said the woman, "but take habits, for example. Do your women object to wearing habits? And the rules of the order, how do you do it?"

"I give them Jesus," Mother Teresa replied.

"Yes, I know Mother," said the woman, "but can you be more specific?"

"I give them Jesus," Mother Teresa repeated again.

"Mother," said the woman, "we are all of us aware of your fine work. I want to know about something else."

Mother Teresa said quietly, "I give them Jesus. There is nothing else."² (

What do we have that the world can't find anywhere else? All we have is the person of Jesus Christ.

In our pluralistic world there are people with many religious backgrounds who call our country their home. And we can learn things from our neighbors. If someone should ask you, though, what is distinctive about Christianity, let me suggest you do as Mother Teresa did. Give them Jesus. And if you don't know enough of Jesus, then perhaps it would be helpful to engage in learning about him.

The greatest heresy current today is that all religions are the same. Certainly, all of the world's great religions have something worthwhile to offer. You can find help in all of them. But what you can't find is the story of the Prodigal Son, or the Good Samaritan or the Rich Fool. There is no higher order of life than that which Jesus taught.

Christianity as an institution might not be too appealing at times, but if you understand the life and teachings of Jesus, he has no peer. Literally. We have a responsibility for the world. We also have something the world cannot find anywhere else, and WE ARE NOT THE SOURCE OF OUR LIGHT; WE ARE BUT REFLECTORS OF A MUCH GREATER SOURCE. There is One who has touched our lives and given us the power and the authority to touch others.

Robert Fulghum is an American author, primarily of short essays. He came to prominence when his first essay collection was published in 1986. It was entitled, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. It stayed on the New York Times bestseller lists for two years. He

² Ernest Boyer, Jr., *Finding God At Home*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers,

1988), pp. 73-74.

wrote things like, "The grass is not, in fact always greener on the other side of the fence. Fences have nothing to do with it. The grass is greenest where it is watered. When crossing over fences, carry water with you and tend the grass wherever you may be."

This is the Robert Fulghum who once attended a seminar on Greek culture on the Island of Crete, led by philosopher, teacher and politician Alexander Papaderos. At the end of the two-week session, led by scholars, experts and intellectuals, Papaderos himself closed the last meeting by asking the usual, "Are there any questions?" For a moment there was silence. Then, Fulghum asked, "Dr. Papaderos, what is the meaning of life?"

Laughter filled the room and people stirred to go home. Papaderos raised his hand. There was silence. Looking intensely at Fulghum, he said, "I will answer your question." Taking his wallet out of his pocket, he retrieved a mirror the size of a quarter. He told how, as a small boy, he had found the small fragment of mirror on the road where a German army motorcycle had been wrecked. The mirror became a new toy.

He was fascinated by the ability to reflect light into the darkest places. Papaderos then said, "As I grew older I learned that reflecting light is not just a child's game. It is a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light, or the source of the light, but I can reflect the light. The light--truth, understanding, knowledge--is always there, but it will not shine into the darkest places unless I reflect it. I have come to understand this as the meaning of life." With that bold statement, Papaderos took his mirror and

redirected the light of the sun onto the faces of each participant at the seminar.

Scientists and astronomers tell us that light travels 186,000 miles per second. This is hard for me to imagine, so perhaps thinking about a different way makes it understandable. Some of the starlight shining in your window left that star about the time Shakespeare was writing his plays. The light has been traveling all that time to reach you and provide its light.

"The work of the first disciples still influences you. Centuries ago, men and women were commissioned to make disciples of all nations. Although they have been dead for almost two thousand years, the effect of their work has traveled through history and touched us. It is felt in our lives today."³

Eric Butterworth tells about a college professor who had his sociology class go into the Baltimore slums to get case histories of 200 young boys. The students were asked to write an evaluation of each boy's future. In every case the students wrote, "He hasn't got a chance."

Twenty-five years later a second sociology professor came across the earlier study. He had his students follow up on the project to see what had happened to these boys. With the exception of 20 boys who had moved away or died, the students learned that 176 of the remaining 180 had achieved extraordinarily successful lives as inventors, businessmen, scientists, workmen, physicians, and attorneys.

The professor was astounded and decided to

³ Dr. William P. Barker uses this as an illustration in the *Tarbell's Bible Study Guide*.

pursue the matter further. Fortunately, all the men were in the area and he was able to ask each one, "How do you account for your success?" In each case the reply came with feeling, "There was a teacher."

That teacher was still alive, so he sought her out and asked the elderly but still alert woman what magic formula she had used to pull these boys out of the slums into successful achievement. He showed them a list of her names and her eyes sparkled and her lips broke into a gentle smile. "It's really very simple," she said. "I loved those boys." No wonder those boys succeeded. Their teacher loved them.

Once there was a teacher who also loved his students. He saw possibilities in them that no one else saw. He saw possibilities in them they did not see in themselves. "You are the light of the world," he said to them.

And so they became. The love they received from him they passed on to others. Today there is no place in this world that the light they received from him doesn't shine.

Because of fierce persecution, it is sometimes only a faint flicker. Sometimes because of the weaknesses of his followers the fire is uncertain and tentative, but still it glows. And now it is in your possession and mine. We are the light of the world.

There are people in this world who are lost in darkness and they're looking for a light, "any light" to lead them to spiritual, emotional and mental safety. How about your light? Is it shining? Could they find their way because of you? You and I are the light of the world. We have a responsibility for the world. We have what the world desperately needs. We are not the source of the light but merely reflectors, "reflectors of the true light of Jesus Christ."